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ABSTRACT

This paper offers some suggestions and guidelines for the communications expert or teacher who would serve as consultant to business organizations. Most important, the author suggests, is that he must be flexible in his approaches to employee training programs, adapting them to individual needs and the needs of the organization. He must also have a broad background in communication skills, especially since theories are not the core of employee training programs. As much as possible, he must tailor the program or course design for individual needs, examining personnel records, if necessary, to determine overall backgrounds. His teaching methods must be structured on an open approach, providing many opportunities for discussion, questioning, and feedback. Finally, he must begin at the outset, especially if he is a college professor, to develop a feeling of trust and rapport with students who are not college-oriented. If a training program proves successful, then the consultant is quite likely to be considered for organizational research problems. (Author/RN)

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WHICH COMES FIRST TRAINING OR RESEARCH?

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CS 500 204

WHICH COMES FIRST
TRAINING OR RESEARCH?

Communication Consultant: "What you need is a communication training program for all your people?"

Plant Manager: "Why?"

Communication Consultant: "Well because it will:

1. Improve the ability of your foremen and supervisors to communicate.
2. Prevent misunderstanding between upper level management and shop supervisors.
3. Improve the flow of information upward from the hourly workers.
4. Motivate people toward a greater understanding of themselves.
5. Improve production and etc., etc., etc."

Plant Manager: "But just how do you know that my people really need such a program or that it will be effective and long lasting?"

------- Now what do you do? -------

The alternatives which you have to select from are about as attractive as being given a choice of a rusty razor blade or a .45 with which to commit suicide. Suppose you do sell the plant manager on a training program and he then discovers that this program does little to improve the relationship between supervisors and subordinates. Now

what do you do? Or suppose you survey foremen and hourly workers only to discover that the real problem is the boss himself. Now what do you do?

These very real dilemmas will face every consultant. But they will prove to be especially knotty to those consultants who:

1. Prepare a solution to a problem before identifying the problem. (Often when a beginner hears about a particular program he says, "That's so simple I'll just package it up and start talking with some people).

2. Train because it is easy to do. (Many people are turned off by most training programs because they are too standardized to be very useful.)

3. Propose solutions which they are not prepared to deliver. (Don't ever accept a job you can't handle.)

Flexibility is the key to a consultant's success. Closing off possible alternatives to solving problems by predetermining what those solutions should be can compound the problem, lose credibility with the organization, and make it ever more difficult for other consultants.

It is important that the consultant follow some common sense rules.

1. Never participate in a consulting situation for which you have little expertise.

2. Never undertake an assignment which is too large or complex for your time or abilities.

3. Never undertake an assignment without a written understanding or your duties, fees, or legal limitations.

4. Never betray a confidence.

5. Never underestimate your fee.

It is our belief that because of the reputation of too many consultants those of us who are part-time consultants must do everything we can to prove our sincerity and worth. Because most of us are teachers first and consultants second it is important to lead with our strength. What

you need to do is to prepare fully in a broad spectrum of communication SKILLS. Now before you gulp and look down your nose at skills, understand one very vital principle: people in the real world are concerned with pragmatic "how-to-do-it" knowledge. They are not interested in comparative theories or quotes from great scholars. If they are going to retain you, "you" had better be the expert---not some textbook. Remember most businesses make money because they employ special work skills within the job speciality. So when you say, "Perhaps you aren't open to feedback" and he responds, "Ok! Just how do I become more open?", you had better be specific. (See Barker and Kibler (Editors) Speech Communication Behavior. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1971, p. 372 and David W. Johnson, Reaching Out: Interpersonal Effectiveness and Self-Actualization. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1972, pp. 36-38.) So prepare yourself with an understanding of the essential principles of Communication. Don't specialize, but try for as broad a background in communication as possible.

Secondly, if you are going to be involved in consulting, realize that many organizations are firm believers in continuing education. Now without trying to sell training for training sake or for pure greed, begin to make contacts with personnel directors of organizations. There is not a single organization executive who can resist the opportunity to discuss communication. We feel that every successful executive knows the value of communication even though he may not be well trained in it. If an opportunity arises where your knowledge can be used by this organization, then by all means proceed. We recommend that you not prepare and prepackage a course or program and then go looking for customers. Tailor your program to suit those people who will be participating in it.

Before designing such a program, you must begin to assess the knowledge level and needs of the proposed participants. Such an assignment may require a simple task such as examining personnel files with some interviews or the use of an inventory such as the PSI (Purdue Supervisory Inventory). It is important to know where they are coming from or what their background happens to be.

While no one should dictate what content should be in any particular course, we can give some practical advice as to the methods used in such a course. Most of these men are active and they need to be able to participate as much as possible. Don't lecture and ask questions. Use as many self-scoring inventories, discussions, role-playing, video-tape, etc., as you can to involve each participant. Provide some mechanism for feedback to you the instructor. (Bill Cash, "A Classroom Feedback System." Improving College and University Teaching, Vol. XX No. 4 Autumn 1972, p. 291.) Those who are interested in improving your ability to work in other environments outside the classroom MUST be keenly aware of the feeling and reactions of your students. Post meeting reaction forms (feedback) do not need to be lengthy. We never ask more than four questions and we encourage the participants to write comments. Then we summarize all comments and answers, make copies, and distribute them at the next meeting. This not only provides the participants with a running account of how others view this course, but it also enhances the credibility of the instructor. The fact that you are engaging in "GOOD" communication practice by allowing the class to see you as an open individual will undoubtedly make you appear to be a good guy.

We have discovered that college professors, especially those with NO lengthy work experiences outside education, generate a sense of

distrust among many work-a-day individuals. Unless you can establish your trustworthiness and good intentions at the outset, it would be difficult for you to penetrate this wall of distrust. Here are some small frills which have helped us:

1. We never address ourselves by title, always first names.
2. We provide the student with free notebooks and coffee is served each evening.
3. We reproduce all the necessary material for the course so there is a minimum of outside reading.
4. We ask questions and seldom make pronouncements.
5. We willingly participate in any activity that we ask our students to participate in.
6. Whenever possible we allow the students to criticize their own ideas or solutions.

Presume that this training program is a success. A successful program can now be used to enable you to get your foot in the door. We cannot stress strongly enough the importance of establishing your initial credibility with an organization. Now you can begin to undertake research assignments with that firm.

We strongly urge a continuing relationship with whatever organization you are retained. This ongoing relationship is vital to completing meaningful research.

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